

Confession in the Ancient Church

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The Protestants condemn the Church because the Mystery of Confession is used. They tell us that it is not proper to be performed because people do not have the authority to forgive sins, and the first Christian Church did not apply it. But the facts and evidence prove the contrary.

Holy Confession was a known practice in the Old Testament (Lev. 5:5-6; Num. 5:5-7; Prov. 28:13). That's why people came to John the Forerunner and confessed their sins, while he certified their repentance with baptism (Matt. 3:5-6; Mk. 1:4-5).

The practice was continued in the Christian Church—"Many also of those who had believed came forward to confess and reveal their deeds" (Acts 19:18), resulting in being forgiven by the Apostles in accordance with the Lord's promise, that this authority would be given to the apostles (Matt. 16:19; 18:18). This was fulfilled after Christ's resurrection. Naturally, forgiveness is not based on the Apostles' power but rather "in the blood" of the Lord (Jn. 20:21-23; 1 Jn. 1:7).

The confessor is used as an instrument, as a servant of Christ and steward of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1; compare Titus 1:7; 1 Jn. 1:9-2:2).

In the early Church, confession was made publicly in the holy congregation of the faithful, where, of course, the clergy and the bishop gave the absolution. "To all them that repent, the Lord grants forgiveness, if they turn in penitence to the unity of God, and to communion with the bishop" (Ignatius, [*Epistle to the Philadelphians*](#), 8:1), while the Diadache exhorts: "In Church, you shall confess your transgressions, and you shall not approach your prayer with an evil conscience, this is the way of life" (4:14).

St. Cyprian emphasizes that the sinner is again admitted into ecclesiastical communion, that is, in the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist, "by the imposition of the hand of the bishop and clergy" ([*Epistle*](#) 16, 2). Holy Communion is not permitted to anyone "if previously the bishop and clergy did not place the hands upon him" ([*Epistle*](#) 18, 2). The "remission," he says, that happened "through the clergy" is "pleasing to the Lord" ([*The Lapsed*](#), 28).

St. Basil refers to confession in the Apostolic Church (Acts 19:18) and concludes, "It is necessary to confess our sins to those to whom the dispensation of God's mysteries is entrusted. Those doing penance of old are found to have done it before the saints. It is written in the Gospel that they confessed their sins to John the Baptist (Matt. 3:6), but in Acts (19:18) they confessed to the apostles" ([*Rules Briefly Treated* 288](#)).

St. John Chrysostom states about the clergy: "For they who inhabit the earth and make their abode, there are entrusted with the administration of things which are in Heaven, and have received an authority which God has not given to angels or archangels. For it has not been said to them, "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven, and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven." They who rule on earth have indeed authority to bind, but only the body: whereas this binding lays hold of the soul and penetrates the heavens; and what priests do here below God ratifies above, and the Master confirms the sentence of his servants. For indeed what is it but all manner of heavenly authority which He has given them when He says, "Whose sins ye remit they are remitted, and whose sins ye retain they are retained?" ([*On the Priesthood*, 3:5](#)).

Thus, the Orthodox Church continues this proto-Christian tradition of confession before a spiritual father.

Source: *Εγχειρίδιο αρέσεων και παραχριστιανικών ομάδων* (3η Έκδοση Αθήνα 1994).

